

“Cuff Key to Door Key: A Systems Approach to Reentry”

NIC’s Inaugural Virtual Conference

By Bernie Iszler

On June 12, 2013, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) will launch its first-ever virtual conference, “Cuff Key to Door Key: A Systems Approach to Reentry.” Topics covered during the conference will include mental health, sentencing, a review of successful reentry programs, Thinking for a Change (T4C), and a look at the challenges of reentry and transforming corrections culture. Edward Latessa, the interim dean and professor at the College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services at the University of Cincinnati, will deliver the keynote address.

Why a Virtual Conference?

NIC planned its virtual conference with several things in mind:

- A topic that is relevant both to the field and nontraditional corrections stakeholders;
- An easily-accessible website for staff who work evening shifts; and
- A conference setup with both live and recorded sessions that is as interactive as possible.

With challenges facing government agencies that limit their ability to develop and deliver effective training for the broad array of stakeholders involved in reentry, the virtual conference also serves as a platform for disparate groups of community organizations, schools, health facilities, social service providers, faith-based organizations and criminal justice partners to receive quality reentry training from experts in the field. Organizations and individuals can make conference sessions central to an ongoing training initiative, or use them as introductions to begin the

tough conversations that lead to collaboration and the implementation of reentry programs.

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Attending the Virtual Conference

A virtual conference is conducted entirely online, and participants can join the conference using any electronic device with an Internet connection. Individuals can join the conference and attend on their own or, as they might during an NIC satellite/Internet broadcast, attend the conference as part of a group where events are streamed before a large audience.

The conference will include both live and recorded sessions. During live sessions, there will be opportunities for participants to ask presenters questions through a chat feature. During recorded sessions, participants will be able to ask questions using a thread, where the presenter will enter an online discussion area periodically to answer the questions. Throughout

the conference, participants will have the chance to ask presenters questions virtually in much the same way that audiences meet with presenters after workshops during face-to-face conferences.

Those who plan to attend should test their Internet connection well before the conference to ensure they will be able to access all events. Participants will be able to access the conference website several days before the start of the conference. They can begin to use the discussion area and post questions for presenters prior to the sessions. Those who are unable to attend the conference live will be able to access recordings of the conference’s content for up to 30 days after the conference.

The Complexities of Successful Reentry Programming

Prisoner reentry is a complex issue. The transition from jail or prison to the community can be challenging not only for offenders, but for their families and communities as well. Reentry and the reintegration of ex-offenders is a national public policy concern. As many sentencing laws were enacted throughout the 1980s and 1990s, people failed to anticipate the consequences those laws would pose toward the thousands of incarcerated people who would be released decades later. The failure to plan for their reintegration has directly contributed to, and will continue to perpetuate, devastating societal problems, including unemployment, poverty, crime, broken families, substance abuse and homelessness.¹

The requirements and goals of successful reentry initiatives include:

- Assisting former offenders with the transition from incarceration to their communities. Reentry planning may begin while offenders are still in correctional facilities and may carry into the community after they are released. An offender's active link between in-prison services and community services may involve a mentor, case manager or steering committee;
- Enhancing public safety by helping communities realize no new crimes and no new victims. Successful offender reentry results in safer, stronger communities;
- Requiring collaboration both within the fragmented correctional arena and across traditional boundaries. This means working with human services agencies, community organizations and citizens; and
- Adopting strategies and methodologies proven to work, and discarding those that do not, basing practice on evidence.²

Common reentry services include housing, education, employment assistance, peer mentoring or case management, physical and mental health services, and family reunification. Reentry programs have traditionally focused on a specific area, such as job training and placement or treating substance abuse disorders. However, given the complexity of challenges facing returning offenders, a reentry program focused on a single area may not adequately address the issues faced by this population. In recent years, practitioners have recommended that agencies, including those not traditionally involved in reentry services (such as community colleges), coordinate to provide more comprehensive reentry strategies.

The NIC inaugural virtual conference will address these issues and more. With sessions scheduled throughout the day, the conference will provide opportunities for both traditional and nontraditional partners to learn more about reentry — and to discover how they can develop or improve reentry programs in their local areas.

Bernie Iszler is correctional program specialist for the National Institute of Corrections. For more information about the upcoming NIC inaugural virtual conference, contact her at (303) 338-6618; or biszler@bop.gov. For information about other NIC training programs, visit www.nicic.gov/training. To learn how to register and receive virtual conference alerts about scheduled speakers and events, visit www.nicic.gov/Training/VC2013.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Independent Committee on Reentry and Employment. 2006. *Report and recommendations to New York state on enhancing employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated people*. New York, N.Y.: Author.

² Burke, P. 2008. *TPC reentry handbook: Implementing the NIC transition from prison to the community model*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Corrections. Retrieved March 18, 2013, from <http://nicic.gov/Library/022669>.